

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 2, 2009

The Burning of the du Pont Barns: In this article, I tread on dangerous ground, as I do no research for anecdotes in the *Weekly News*, and libraries at Hagley and the Delaware Historical Society will have the correct facts on the story told herewith. I relate it to you as I remember my father telling it to me about 70 years ago.

About 1889, one after another of the well-built barns on du Pont family farms northwest of Wilmington were torched by an arsonist. With no fire departments except in the cities, they were almost completely destroyed after massive fires, and with little available crime detection, there seemed no end to this terrible arson. One of the du Ponts, possibly Colonel Henry A. du Pont of Winterthur, hired the agency started 30 years before by Allan Pinkerton, to find the culprit.

A Pinkerton man came to Wilmington and checked in at the Columbus Inn on Pennsylvania Avenue. In those days it was a lodging place; in more recent years, it was one of Wilmington's best restaurants. Everyday he would stroll the downtown streets, and Market Street in the center of town was usually where the action was. He would engage people in conversation, on the sidewalk and in the stores, shops, and taverns. The strategy was that sooner or later something would come out in conversation that related to the burning of the barns. After several weeks of this exercise, the Pinkerton man thought he had circumstantial evidence, and he laid his plan to implicate his suspect. He became especially friendly with him, and they exchanged stories of their adventures.

The day came for the trap to be sprung. In a state of apparent urgent distress, the detective told his suspect: "I'm in real trouble, and I need a true friend to help me get out of this! Can I count on you to help? I'll be eternally grateful." The suspect agreed to do what he could. "Meet me at the Columbus Inn at 7 o'clock, and I'll explain," said the Pinkerton man. The suspect agreed to be there. When they met, the detective confided, "I killed a man in a fight, and I have the body rolled up in a blanket in my room upstairs. Will you help me dispose of the body?" The suspect confirmed that he was willing to help in the devious scheme.

They went upstairs to the detective's room, and, sure enough, there was a blanket on the floor with what looked like a corpse rolled up inside. The Pinkerton man needed to make sure his suspect would not back down. He asked, "How can I be sure you will help me and will not turn me in?" Answered the suspect: "You think I can't keep a secret? Who do you think burned all the du Pont barns and never got caught?" With that the "corpse" rolled out of his blanket, became the witness to the suspect's declaration, and the case was soon closed.